India doesn’t need more attractions. It needs a tourism system that works

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India, a country with unmatched cultural diversity, natural landscapes, heritage assets and spiritual traditions, attracted fewer than 10 million foreign tourist arrivals in 2023. **(PTI)**

SUMMARY

In an increasingly competitive global tourism market, the winners will not necessarily be those with the most attractions. They will be those that best align marketing, connectivity and visitor facilitation around clearly identified source markets.

Last year, more than 30 million Indians travelled overseas. By the end of this decade, India is expected to become one of the world's largest outbound tourism markets. Across Asia, Europe and the Middle East, tourism boards, airlines and governments are competing aggressively for a share of the Indian traveller's wallet.

Yet, there is a striking paradox. India, a country with unmatched cultural diversity, natural landscapes, heritage assets and spiritual traditions, attracted fewer than 10 million foreign tourist arrivals in 2023. Thailand welcomed nearly 36 million international visitors in 2024. Vietnam attracted over 17 million. Even countries with a fraction of India's size and tourism assets consistently outperform it on international arrivals.

Why?

The answer lies in how successful tourism destinations think about growth. For decades, tourism policy has largely focused on the supply side—building infrastructure, developing destinations, restoring heritage sites and improving visitor amenities. These investments are necessary. But they are no longer sufficient. The countries that are gaining market share in global tourism are increasingly focused on the demand side. They ask a different question: what makes a traveller choose one destination over another?

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Vietnam offers perhaps the clearest recent example. A decade ago, Vietnam was not a mainstream destination for Indian tourists. Today, it is one of the fastest growing overseas destinations for Indian families, honeymooners and young travellers. This did not happen because Vietnam discovered new beaches or built new monuments. It happened because it systematically reduced friction.

The country identified India as a priority source market and launched targeted marketing campaigns across major Indian cities. Vietnamese tourism authorities actively partnered with travel platforms, tour operators and digital influencers to build awareness among Indian travellers. At the same time, airlines dramatically expanded connectivity. Direct flights today connect Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad and Kolkata with destinations such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang. Low-cost carriers played a particularly important role in making travel affordable for India's growing middle class.

Equally important was visa policy. Vietnam expanded its e-visa programme, simplified procedures and reduced uncertainty for travellers. The message was clear: visiting Vietnam would be easy. These actions were not independent initiatives. They were part of a coordinated effort to grow arrivals from a specific market.

The same pattern can be seen elsewhere. Thailand has repeatedly introduced visa-free access for Indian travellers. The

UAE has combined world-class aviation connectivity with aggressive destination marketing. Saudi Arabia, once largely absent from global leisure tourism, has rapidly expanded e-visas, airline capacity and international promotion as part of its tourism transformation strategy.

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Different countries. Different tourism products. The same playbook. Marketing creates awareness. Flights create accessibility. Visa facilitation creates conversion. The most successful tourism economies understand that these are not separate policy domains. They are components of a single growth strategy.

This lesson is particularly relevant for India today. The country is investing heavily in tourism infrastructure. New airports are being built. States are developing tourism circuits. Heritage assets are being revitalized. The government has repeatedly highlighted tourism's role in employment generation and economic growth.

But infrastructure alone does not guarantee visitors. The next phase of India's tourism strategy must focus on source markets as seriously as it focuses on destinations. Which 10 countries should India prioritize over the next five years? Which traveller segments offer the highest economic value? Which international cities need direct connectivity to Indian destinations? Which visa and arrival processes continue to create friction? Which marketing campaigns are generating measurable increases in arrivals? These questions require coordination across tourism authorities, airlines, airports, immigration agencies, state governments and the private sector. Tourists do not experience these institutions separately. They experience them as a single journey.

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India's tourism challenge is therefore not a shortage of attractions. It is a shortage of alignment between the institutions that influence travel decisions. Countries such as Vietnam have demonstrated that tourism growth is not simply about creating better destinations. It is about making the decision to visit easier than competing destinations.

In an increasingly competitive global tourism market, the winners will not necessarily be those with the most attractions. They will be those that best align marketing, connectivity and visitor facilitation around clearly identified source markets. The real competition is no longer between destinations. It is between systems.

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